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Lucia A Keegan 11/14/2006 11:29:32 AM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 007322

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/08/2016  
TAGS: [FR](#) [IZ](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: FRENCH PRESIDENCY VIEWS ON IRAQ, LEBANON, AND  
OTHER MIDDLE EAST ISSUES

REF: A. STATE 181094

[1](#)B. PARIS 6512  
[1](#)C. PARIS POINTS OF 11/8

Classified By: A/DCM Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A/DCM met 11/8 with Dominique Boche, President Chirac's foreign policy advisor for the Middle East and North Africa and received a short readout of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's visit to France November 1-2. Boche noted that Talabani did not raise France's long-standing offer to train Iraqi security forces in France, adding that even if Talabani had raised the subject, the French no longer consider the offer to be on the table. Boche was skeptical about PA President Mahmoud Abbas' ability to form a national unity government with Hamas; appeared confident that Lebanese PM Siniora would be able to resist pressure from Hizballah and from Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun to expand the government; and predicted that President Chirac's successor would be tempted to open a dialogue with Damascus -- but would soon discover that sending envoys to Asad's regime was an exercise in futility. He confirmed that France expects to sign a revised military cooperation agreement with Kuwait during the Emir's visit to Paris on November 30. Turning to President Chirac's foreign policy legacy in the region, Boche noted that improved relations with Israel over the past two years have allowed France to move beyond a "declaratory, and largely condemnatory, policy approach" to an "operational policy" that allows France to influence events on the ground. End summary.

Talabani Visit

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¶2. (C) PolMinCouns and NEA Watcher met 11/8 with Dominique Boche, President Chirac's Counselor for the Middle East and North Africa. Boche provided a succinct readout of the November 1-2 visit to France of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, saying that the atmosphere in Talabani's meeting with Chirac was quite warm. Talabani avoided making specific requests of Chirac and the conversation between the two presidents remained general, yet encompassed discussion of Turkey, Syria and Iran. Talabani was upbeat on Turkey ("this was interesting coming from Talabani," said Boche) and sharply critical of Damascus, which he said was facilitating insurgent operations in Iraq. (Note: In a meeting with Arab Ambassadors in Paris following his meeting with President Chirac, Talabani denied having discussed Syria with Chirac. However, Iraqi Ambassador Abboud confirmed that Chirac and Talabani discussed Syria at length. End note.) With respect to the security situation inside Iraq, Talabani came across as overly optimistic in Boche's opinion. "He cited some figures about how the number of attacks was declining. This struck us as wishful thinking," said Boche.

¶3. (C) In terms of French support for Iraq, the mere fact that Paris agreed to the visit constituted support for Talabani and for the United States in the run-up to the mid-term elections, Boche said without a hint of irony. Stressing that it was in no one's interest (other than perhaps Iran's) to see the situation in Iraq deteriorate further, Boche pointed to the fact that France had forgiven 80 percent of Iraq's bilateral debt. When A/DCM noted the USG's interest in 100% debt relief (Ref A), Boche responded that Talabani had not pressed for a cancellation of the remaining 20 percent, although Boche hinted that any further French economic assistance -- even in the context of the Iraq Compact -- was unlikely; France sees the revival of Iraqi petroleum revenues (itself dependent on the reduction of corruption in the petroleum sector), rather than a continuation of international assistance, as the key to Iraq's future economic growth. By the same token, Talabani did not raise France's longstanding offer to train Iraqi security forces in France. "As you know, when we made our offer the Iraqis never did respond," said Boche, who made it clear that the French now consider the offer to be off the table because they judge that the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior has been compromised by the infiltration of and support for Shia militias. (Note: As reported Ref B, the Quai told us several weeks ago that the training offer was no longer in prospect; we consider Boche's comments as definitive confirmation of that position. End note.)

¶4. (C) Boche gently scoffed at the Iraqi Education Minister's request that France assist in providing textbooks to Iraqi schools, suggesting this was not an appropriate priority for a country in crisis. In the end, the only "deliverable" for Talabani's visit was a French commitment to open a diplomatic office in Irbil. Asked how he saw France's relations with Iraq evolving over the next six to twelve months, Boche said that it was totally dependent on the security situation -- a situation he saw as headed downhill. He anticipated that, whatever the outcome, France's 2007 presidential election would have little impact on the Elysee's Iraq policy. "It's natural for candidates to debate international questions during a campaign, but after the election continuity prevails," he said.

#### Israeli-Palestinian Relations

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¶5. (C) Turning to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Boche said the situation in the Occupied Territories was deteriorating in every respect: political, security, and humanitarian. He expressed skepticism that Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas would reach agreement with Hamas on the composition of a new PA government. When asked about the Quai spokesperson's dismissive comments about the Roadmap (Ref C) he appeared unaware of the comments but suggested that there had been no change in France's position on the Roadmap or the Quartet. He attempted to differentiate Chirac's call for an international conference on Middle East

peace from similar calls made by Spain, Saudi Arabia, and others, explaining that only France was interested in exploring what the international community might do to help the parties take risks for peace (as opposed to prescribing a solution).

#### Lebanon

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¶6. (C) With respect to Lebanon, Boche appeared to take for granted that Siniora would be able to fend off demands by Hizballah and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement for an expanded role in the government. He assessed that the "aberrant" alliance between Aoun and Hizballah was merely tactical and inherently unstable; he was therefore optimistic about the possibility of engineering a split between Aoun and Hizballah.

¶7. (C) As for the performance of UNIFIL, Boche offered the Quai's prosaic analysis of UNSCR 1701 implementation, which posits a linkage between enforcement of the arms embargo and ending Israeli overflights of Lebanon. Boche said he harbored no illusions that Israel would entirely halt overflights of Lebanon, and seemed somewhat understanding of Israel's insistence on acquiring its own aerial imagery. However, he complained that certain overflights, such as those flown at low-altitude over Beirut, had no intelligence value and were simply ill-considered provocations. (Note: In a related development, French Defense Minister Michele Alliot-Marie told the National Assembly on November 8 that French peacekeepers assigned to UNIFIL came within two seconds of firing on Israeli jets that buzzed their position on October 31, saying "a catastrophe was barely avoided." The Israeli Embassy in Paris is seeking details of the incident. End note)

#### Syria: No Point in Courting Asad

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¶8. (C) With a nod to the spate of European envoys who have visited Damascus in recent weeks before returning to their own capitals empty-handed, Boche noted wryly that France's EU partners were rushing to Syria at the very moment that Saudi Arabia was more determined than ever not to haggle with Bashar al-Asad. He conceded that it was natural, at moments of a diplomatic blockage, for well-intentioned parties to assume that direct dialogue might move things forward; only the painful experience of seeing their envoys repeatedly return empty-handed would disabuse them of this notion. "I've seen this four or five times over the course of my career," said Boche, who thought it inevitable that Chirac's successor would likewise be tempted to send out some sort of feeler to Damascus during the first six months of his or her presidency. "It won't lead to anything," he said. Chirac, after all, had gone further than any other European leader in reaching out to Bashar following the death of Hafez al-Asad, yet the Syrian regime gave nothing back.

¶9. (C) Shifting gears, Boche said he was struck by the inexorable Islamization of Syrian society taking place under the Baathist regime's nose. "It's much less secular than it was just a few years ago," he said, whether measured by mosque attendance, the number of women wearing the veil in public, or the number of Muslims fasting during Ramadan. "Of course, it's the only way of showing resistance to the regime," he added.

#### Iran/Gulf States

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¶10. (C) Recalling the visit to Paris several weeks ago of Iranian President Ahmadinejad's personal envoy, Mojtaba Hashemi-Samareh, Boche said he thought the current Iranian regime was dominated by millenarians. Boche said that Chirac tried (with little apparent success) to persuade Hashemi-Samareh that Iran's interests were not served by fomenting instability in Lebanon, Iraq, or Afghanistan. Boche added that Iran's exploitation of Arab frustration with

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would likely bring Tehran into conflict with moderate Arab governments in the future. Turning to the Gulf States, Boche confirmed that France expects to sign a revised version of its existing military cooperation agreement with Kuwait during a visit to Paris by the Kuwaiti Emir on November 30. Boche said the Kuwaitis were intent on strengthening their bilateral relations with France, which had diminished significantly since the time of the first Gulf War.

#### Chirac's Middle East Legacy

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¶11. (C) Asked about Chirac's foreign policy legacy in the Middle East, Boche pointed to the steady improvement in Franco-Israeli relations over the past two years. As a result of that improvement, France had moved away from a "declarative and largely condemnatory" approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict which was popular in the Arab world but ineffectual. "We had moral influence, but we had no influence on the ground," said Boche. In lieu of that approach, France had adopted an "operational policy" rooted in good relations with both the Palestinians and the Israelis. He noted that now when Chirac speaks to Israeli PM Olmert, Olmert asks Chirac's advice -- a significant change from just a few years ago. Consequently, France (and by extension, Europe) was better positioned to play an effectual role on the ground, as demonstrated by the expansion of UNIFIL. Boche concluded his tour d'horizon with the hope that in the future Europe would play an even bigger role in the region.

¶12. (C) Comment: Boche's comments are further evidence that no new meaningful commitment to Iraq, political or otherwise, is in prospect as we enter the final months of the Chirac presidency. We were struck by his apparent complacency on Lebanon, with respect to the domestic political situation as well as UNIFIL's position on the ground. On the latter point, he evinced no concern about whether UNIFIL would be able to sustain its peacekeeping role over the longer term.

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